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**The Oslo Agreement in  
Norwegian foreign policy**

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by

**N. Butenschøn**  
Associate Professor and  
Director of International and Postgraduate Studies  
University of Oslo

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# The Oslo Agreement in Norwegian foreign policy

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Norway is a small country of some four million people on the northern outskirts of Europe, sometimes described as "a geopolitical appendix to Siberia". It is no wonder, then, that Norway's relations with the far-away Middle East have always been minimal. There have been few incentives for building such relations, considering Norway's immediate national interests and cultural orientations. The fact that the value of Norway's current exports per annum to the entire Arab world is about the same as that of its exports to Singapore alone illustrates the point.<sup>2</sup>

It took the world by surprise, therefore, that Norway, of all countries, was to play a decisive role in bringing about the accord signed between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) on 13 September 1993, known as the Oslo Agreement. The secret diplomacy organised from Oslo from late autumn 1992 until the draft agreement was publicly disclosed on 20 August 1993 was in many ways the "antithesis" of Middle East peace diplomacy as we know it historically, conducted as it normally has been by Great Powers already heavily involved in the region's politics and economy. These experiences

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on research for a book (in Norwegian) on the 1993 Oslo Agreement between Israel and the PLO (Butenschøn, N.A. (1994): *Oslo-avtalen - fred på Israels premisser?* [The Oslo Agreement - Peace on Israel's Conditions?] Oslo: Aschehoug) and for my contribution to a textbook (also in Norwegian) on Norwegian foreign policy (Butenschøn, N.A. (1995): "Norge og Midtøsten" [Norway and the Middle East] in Knutsen, Th. and Gjerdåker, S. (eds.), *Norges Utenrikspolitikk* [Norway's Foreign Policy], Oslo: Cappelen). Special thanks go to a number of high-ranking officials in the Norwegian foreign ministry for allotting me time for interviews. Needless to say, however, all policy- or value-related opinions in this paper are mine alone.

<sup>2</sup> According to figures supplied by the Norwegian Export Council for 1993, 1994 and 1995.

include the Madrid talks (initiated by the United States after its military victory in the Gulf War of 1991) which preceded the Oslo talks.

Whereas the Madrid talks were organised in the form of a traditional peace conference - chaired by the US and Russia, with negotiating teams led from the start by heads of state or foreign ministers, and with all the pomp and circumstance and world media attention that follows - the Oslo back channel was organised in the form of an informal dialogue group. Academics and medium-ranking officials played a leading role, at least in the initial stages, without any official mandate or even support from state leaderships which could be proved in the event of the channel being "exploded" by the media. The political-psychological effects of the breakthrough in Oslo were arguably to some extent due to these contrasting frameworks of the negotiations.

Was Norway's contribution to the diplomatic success of the "Oslo Channel" basically of an accidental nature, a situational coincidence, a unique historical opportunity successfully seized by a handful of able and creative Norwegian diplomats - and thus of little interest beyond the fascinating story of secret diplomacy that it presented? Or is it possible to explain this role as the product of a certain long-term policy which, combined with a number of contextual factors, was given an exceptional chance to succeed? In the latter case, which I believe is closest to the truth, certain lessons might be learned from the experience, regardless of one's political evaluation of the Oslo Agreement itself in the context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.<sup>1</sup>

This paper discusses Norway's role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process within the parameters of the country's foreign policy orientation in general and Middle East policy in particular. It is difficult, and indeed not my purpose, to give an exact answer to the question of why the Oslo Channel succeeded as opposed to the other informal and formal approaches at the time, and to evaluate the particular contributions to this process by Norwegian individuals and government. I have noticed, for instance, that the different actors in the drama, when interviewed, tend to give separate versions, especially when it comes to who should be given credit for the original initiative. Such questions are of limited interest. What follows is a discussion of Norway's role in the peace process in the context of Norway's foreign policy orientations in general and Middle East policy in particular.

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<sup>1</sup> This author is among those who have warned that the Oslo Agreement may legitimise and institutionalise a racist "Bantustan solution" to the conflict, but that the process may also entail advantages in the long run from a Palestinian point of view. Establishing a formal structure which is basically similar to an apartheid system represents and expresses in a very important sense the reality of the situation. Current Israeli-Palestinian relations could not be understood in terms of military occupation alone. Struggling for liberation against an apartheid system - from institutionalised bases (self-rule) within the country - is, I believe, after all a better situation to be in than trying to reconquer your country from a hopeless military position. And if the Palestinians and their supporters can get the world (particularly the West and possibly even many Israelis) to see and acknowledge the situation as somewhat similar to apartheid, prospects for a just solution in the future are not mere dreams.



There are a number of historical determinants which taken together explain how it was possible for Norway to play the role it did in the Oslo Channel and which turned out to be crucial for its success as a diplomatic exercise.<sup>1</sup> These include: well-established operational codes in Norwegian foreign policy and the current government's interpretation of these codes; the sensitivity of the Arab-Zionist conflict in Norwegian foreign policy considerations ever since World War II; the unique historical relationship between the Norwegian and Zionist labour movements; and the diverse avenues for confidence-building which were established in the late 1970s and onwards between Norway and the PLO.

In what follows, I will elaborate a little on these points, but let me by way of introduction briefly discuss the Norwegian involvement in the Middle East peace process after the signing of the 1993 Oslo Agreement (in Middle Eastern political parlance often referred to in short as "Oslo").

### **Oslo's involvement in the Middle East after 'Oslo'**

One indication that Norway's role in the Middle East peace process was part of a wider policy orientation is the way in which the country has followed up on its diplomatic success of 1993. Norway's involvement in the peace process did not end with the signing ceremony at the White House. On the contrary, the government decided to make a continued role in the peace process a foreign policy priority. Norway initiated the formation of the group of donor countries, known as the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC) in October 1993, and has been holding the chair ever since. The AHLC (with the US, Russia, the European Union (EU), Japan, Canada, Saudi Arabia and Norway as members, and the Palestine National Authority (PNA), Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, and the UN as associate members) is considered to be "a sort of political steering committee, responsible for the overall guidelines and policies of the aid process."<sup>2</sup> In more practical terms, it is the main financial mechanism of the peace process with the task of co-ordinating fund-raising for the purpose of rebuilding an economic, technical, and administrative infrastructure in the Palestinian territories. The World Bank serves as secretariat, with all decisions being reached by consensus.

Norway has also played a central role in extending the institutional infrastructure of the externally organised aid. On the signing of the Gaza-Jericho Agreement in May 1994, Norway acted as chair of the Co-ordinating Committee for Assistance to the Palestinian Police. In November 1994, the AHLC created two main substructures: the Local Aid Co-ordination Committee (LACC)

<sup>1</sup> These determinants should be seen as necessary (or at least conducive), but certainly not sufficient, conditions for Norway's role in the peace process. It would have come to nothing without the commitments and skills of individual diplomats.

<sup>2</sup> Brynne, Rex (1996): "International Aid to the West Bank and Gaza: A Primer", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. xxv, no. 2, p. 49.



and the Joint Liaison Committee (JLC). The LACC co-ordinates the activities of the major aid agencies with the PNA. Norway co-chairs the LACC with the World Bank and the UN. It also leads, on the donor side, one of the twelve Sectoral Working Groups under the LACC - the one responsible for police. The JLC was established to deal with obstacles to effective delivery of assistance and to review PNA performance in relevant areas, particularly budgetary performance. Again, Norway leads this committee on the donor side. Among other things, the JLC monitors the "Tripartite Action Plan on Revenues, Expenditure, and Donor Funding for the PA" (TAP), signed by the PNA, Israel, and Norway in April 1995.

Furthermore, the Norwegian Agency for Development and Co-operation (NORAD), which is part of the foreign ministry structure, has been involved in rigorous plans for development aid to the occupied territories, also co-ordinating the activities of Norwegian non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The future Palestinian entity, whether it is established as an independent state or not, is expected to be a main recipient of Norwegian development aid in the future. Norway has established a diplomatic representation with the PNA in Gaza, and a separate NORAD office has also been set up there to co-ordinate development projects. Norway is also a major contributor to the group of international police observers (Temporary International Presence, TIP) in Hebron, established to ease tensions in the city until Israel redeploy its troops as agreed in the Interim Agreement (the "Oslo II Agreement") of September 1995.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, Norway takes part in multilateral working groups set up under the Madrid formula dealing with such sensitive issues as distribution of water resources and the Palestinian refugees and displaced persons.

To this we can add that the surviving members of the Norwegian diplomatic team to the Oslo talks<sup>2</sup> have all been deployed in positions - in the Middle East or at the foreign ministry in Oslo - from where they have been able to continue their involvement at the centre-stage of the peace process: Terje Rød-Larsen, the chief organiser of the Oslo negotiations, was first appointed ambassador with the special task of organising Norway's role in the AHLC. In 1994 he was appointed to a new post as UN co-ordinator in the occupied

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<sup>1</sup> The redeployment should have been completed by March 1996, but had not materialised as of November 1996. It was delayed in the first place by Shimon Peres' Labour government with reference to Islamic terrorist bombings in Israel at the time. When the right-wing Benjamin Netanyahu was voted in as the new Israeli prime minister in May 1996 on an "anti-Oslo" platform, the peace process entered its worst crisis so far. Redeployment in Hebron was the most immediate problem that had to be addressed. And as the new government has refused to heed the previous government's commitments, and the Palestinians have refused to reopen the Interim Agreement related to Hebron, the entire peace process is at the time of writing deadlocked.

<sup>2</sup> The core members of the team were: Foreign Minister Johan Jorgen Holst (died in 1994); Terje Rød-Larsen, director of research at the social research institute, FAFO; Jan Egeland, state secretary at the foreign ministry; Mona Juul, a foreign ministry official married to Rød-Larsen.

territories (UN Special Coordinator's Office, UNSCO), initiating and overlooking AHLC projects. This put him in a perfect position to cultivate further his close contacts with the Palestinian and Israeli (Labour Party) leaderships. Mona Juul, a foreign ministry official also on the Oslo team and married to Rød-Larsen, was appointed second-in-command at the Norwegian embassy in Tel Aviv, keeping lines open between the foreign ministry in Oslo and the diplomacy of the peace process. Jan Egeland, state secretary of the foreign ministry, continued his role as the chief co-ordinator of the Norwegian governmental involvement in the Oslo process.

The team's role in the next stage of the Oslo process - negotiating the Interim Agreement (also called the Taba Agreement or Oslo II Agreement, signed in Washington on 28 September 1995) - was modest and low-profile. At this juncture, Israel and the PLO had established a number of negotiating teams and joint workshops for the purpose of implementing the original Oslo Agreement. In spite of delays, setbacks and temporary crises in the process, the parties were then able to communicate directly as a result, to a large degree, of the mutual trust which emerged gradually through the 14 rounds of secret talks in Norway in 1992-3. The "counselling services" of the Norwegians were not needed so much since Yasser Arafat and Shimon Peres were meeting openly and officially.

Many observers (including this writer) believed that the role of the Norwegian team in the peace process was intimately linked to, and dependent on, the unique personal relationships which had developed between the key players in the Oslo Channel. Predictions were that Norway's role in the diplomatic field would be greatly reduced in the event of a change of government in Israel from Labour to Likud. This was exactly what happened on 29 May 1996 when Shimon Peres' Labour-led government lost the elections. Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu was voted in as prime minister, for the first time with a personal mandate from the electorate, and a right-wing coalition government was established on an "anti-Oslo" platform.<sup>1</sup> This was at a time when the final status negotiations ("Oslo III") were scheduled to start as stipulated in the Interim Agreement.

The predictions about Norway's reduced role in the peace diplomacy may have been premature - or so it seemed for a while in September 1996 when the Norwegian team was again centre-stage. The new Israeli government had no direct contacts with the Palestinian leadership. Netanyahu realised (or was brought to accept by the combined efforts of Americans, Europeans, and

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<sup>1</sup> In the new government's official guidelines, the Oslo and consecutive agreements are not mentioned explicitly, only that "[t]he government will negotiate with the Palestinian Authority with the intent of reaching a permanent arrangement, on the condition that the Palestinians fulfil their commitments fully." In these negotiations the government will propose "a framework of self-government" for the Palestinians. Further: "The government will oppose the establishment of a Palestinian state or any other foreign sovereignty west of the Jordan River, and will oppose 'the right of return' of Arab populations to any part of the Land of Israel west of the Jordan River." *The Jerusalem Post*, 18 June 1996.

Israel's own president) that he would have to relate to that leadership sooner or later, and face-to-face. For that purpose it was easier to accept advice and help from Norwegians than from Peres' peace team. The Palestinian leadership also knew that it would have to develop working relations with the new government and do whatever possible to save the Oslo process.

Rød-Larsen and Juul read the situation, and secret talks were organised in their Tel Aviv apartment in August 1996. Previous informal contacts between the Norwegian couple and Netanyahu's security adviser Dr Dore Gold provided a starting-point.<sup>1</sup> According to David Makovsky of the *Jerusalem Post* Netanyahu allowed a number of secret top-level meetings facilitated by Rød-Larsen and Juul with the aim of reaching an agreement with Arafat. Makovsky explains:

Netanyahu's aides began calling Larsen "the *tzaddik*" (righteous one), reflecting the Norwegian's genuine interest in making peace between Israelis and Palestinians and making sure that the Oslo agreement that he facilitated would not collapse. Larsen...offered something to the Netanyahu government which it lacked: a long-standing relationship with Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat and his top deputies. Moreover, Larsen did not represent a superpower and thus constituted no threat to Netanyahu. He could not apply any pressure if Israel's views were not to his liking.<sup>2</sup>

The talks eventually paved the way for the Arafat-Netanyahu meeting at the Erez checkpoint in Gaza on 4 September 1996.

This latest diplomatic achievement of the Norwegian Middle East involvement clearly illustrates its main functions: that of facilitating contacts, contributing to confidence-building and helping the parties to find a language acceptable to both as a basis for further official negotiations. These functions are most needed in situations where communication between the parties has broken down, as was in effect the situation after the Israeli elections. But Norway's role in the Arafat-Netanyahu meeting also demonstrates its limitations. The meeting did not reinvigorate the political process in spite of its symbolic significance. It seems that Netanyahu met Arafat because he calculated that he stood to lose more by not meeting him; not because he was eager to restart implementing the Oslo agreements. In that setting, the Norwegians could do very little to push the process. The "Oslo model" is just not applicable when the parties do not possess the necessary political will to reach agreement. If anything were to help in such situations it would be real persuasion provided by powerful third parties like the US and EU.

The growing and increasingly resource-demanding Norwegian activism, relatively speaking, in the Middle East since 1993 has so far been met with

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<sup>1</sup> Terje Rød-Larsen informed me about these contacts during a private conversation in July 1996.

<sup>2</sup> The *Jerusalem Post*, 2 September 1996, p. 1.



overwhelming support on the national political scene in Norway and has not provoked much public debate.<sup>1</sup> Most people think the peace activism is morally right and serves Norway's interests. Foreign policy officials consider the chairmanship of the AHLC as particularly important as a pay-off or a "peace dividend" for Norway. They regard the AHLC as an important diplomatic platform for Norway, especially after the referendum of 1994 when the Norwegian electorate rejected the government's proposal for joining the EU as a full member state.

Only a few conservative voices have criticised the government's foreign policy priorities with regard to the Middle East peace process. They ask how the explicit "altruism" in Norwegian foreign policy can be justified considering Norway's limited foreign policy resources. More attention, they say, should be paid to the immediate security concerns of Norway, like the volatile nature of the regional security order in north-eastern Europe after the breakup of the Soviet system. Unofficially, there are also those within the foreign ministry who disapprove of the current priorities, not because the Middle East is given special attention, but because of what one official calls "the Gaza-only policy". The main argument is that Norway's relations with the Middle East as a region are not improving as a consequence of the involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. On the contrary, all attention is now focused on the need to save the Oslo Agreement, to the detriment of extending the relations with other countries in the Middle East.

This is particularly ill-advised, the argument goes, considering Norway's interests as a major European oil producer. Norway's Middle East policy should be oriented towards developing economic and political relations with the Gulf states, rather than towards the problems of reconstruction and job-creation in the Gaza Strip.

### **Operational codes in Norwegian foreign policy**

These discussions reflect traditional conflicting views about what should be the basic motive in Norwegian foreign policy. The fundamental structural condition that Norwegian policymakers have always had to consider is a position of extreme *vulnerability*: a population scattered over vast distances from south to north, separated by mountains and fjords; boundaries impossible to defend against superior neighbours; poor conditions for food production apart from fisheries; and an open economy totally dependent on the outside world.

Despite all these unfavourable conditions for a separate national existence, the Norwegians insisted on dissolving the union with their big brother, Sweden, in 1905. The dispute with Sweden was fought over Norway's demand for a separate foreign service. That was achieved along with sovereignty, but it

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<sup>1</sup> There has been opposition to the Oslo Agreement as a strategy for peace, both from pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian individuals, but this is not a critique of Norwegian involvement as such.

was not quite clear to the Norwegians what purposes their new foreign service should serve. This uncertainty reflected a more fundamental problem of defining Norway's foreign policy orientation and identity as a new sovereign country in Europe, a problem which has surfaced in the public political discourse on numerous occasions right up to the debate in the early 1990s on EU membership when large sections of the population were mobilised.

Under the changing conditions since 1905, and apart from the Norwegians' ambiguous identity as Europeans, Norway's foreign policy orientation has been formed by the interplay of three conflicting operational codes.

First, there is an assertive foreign policy orientation which prescribes a vigorous pursuit of Norwegian national interests, particularly maritime interests in the domains of fishing, whaling, and shipping. According to this view Norway should not hesitate to claim what it considers to be its rightful share of maritime resources and uphold the freedom of its merchant marine - two factors which are vitally important for the security and economic well-being of the country.

Second, there is a more defensive orientation based on the idea that the best foreign policy a country like Norway can have is *not* to have a foreign policy at all, not to show too much in the landscape, because Norway is totally dependent on sympathy from the outside world. Norway should avoid conflict and if possible contribute to building bridges between adversaries who otherwise could threaten Norway's security, and to the establishment of an international legal order that protects small states.

Third, there are variations of idealist conceptions which prescribe an active foreign policy on behalf of universal moral standards of humanity and justice; Norway's interests are best served if its policy contributes to peace and justice in the world, both within and outside its own region.

While it is reasonable to assume that these three different operational ideas exist side by side in the Norwegian foreign policy decision-making strata, backed by respective economic interests, political parties, and opinion groups in the society, there is also a historical development in the balance between them. Examples of assertive, even expansionist, Norwegian policies can be found, mostly prior to World War II. For example, early this century Norway laid claim to vast territories in the Antarctic based on its whaling and exploration expeditions. In the 1930s, Greenland - the world's largest island - was claimed by Norway, but was embarrassingly lost in a legal dispute with Denmark. At the same time, however, Norway followed a policy of non-alliance and neutrality and aimed to stay out of major conflicts between great powers. This policy was successful during World War I, but failed to keep Norway out of World War II.

The idealistic motive in Norwegian foreign policy was first represented by Fridtjof Nansen, a famous explorer, scientist, diplomat and philanthropist. As Norway's representative at the League of Nations from 1920, he became the organisation's first High Commissioner for Refugees. He initiated and organised huge campaigns to repatriate millions of refugees from World War I and the Turkish-Greek war, to help the Armenians after the Turkish onslaught, and to save millions of Russians and Ukrainians from starvation. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1922, and has ever since been an obligatory reference for those who argue for a strong moral dimension in Norwegian foreign policy. With the Labour Party ascending as a dominant political party in the 1930s, and with the political and ideological impact of the Spanish civil war in Europe, socialist ideas of international solidarity and justice, as well as international humanitarianism, came on the public foreign policy agenda.

The German occupation of Norway during World War II, and the military unpreparedness of the Norwegian army at the time, changed the agenda drastically. The Norwegian government-in-exile was brought into close collaboration with the allies, particularly Britain and the US. This, together with the experience of an expanding Soviet power in the early Cold War years, made security-related issues totally dominating in the political discourse and eradicated the traditional basis for Norwegian non-alliance.

Norway became a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 1949 but not without a nervous eye on its Soviet neighbour. Norway wanted the security guarantees and deterrent effect that the Western alliance could offer, but did everything to reassure the Soviet Union that Norway would not be a Western frontline state against Soviet interests. Throughout the Cold War Norway kept a very low and defensive profile, faithfully cultivating the two pillars of its postwar foreign policy: loyalty towards NATO and loyalty towards the UN. (Loyalty towards the UN was greatly enhanced by the election of the Norwegian Labour Party politician and wartime foreign minister Trygve Lie as the first UN Secretary-General.)

Since the end of the Cold War an assertive tone is again being heard in Norwegian foreign policy. This is evident both with regard to the traditional issue of maritime resources, including whaling, and with regard to a new "crusader diplomacy" in the Nansen tradition, explicitly based on idealist premises. In 1989 the government of Gro Harlem Brundtland presented a White Paper, later passed by the parliament with the support of all major political parties, which introduced the idea of what was called "extended security": that is that Norway's security is not only dependent on reliable defence forces and external security guarantees, but also on its own ability to contribute to global problem-solving. Regional conflicts, Third World poverty and ecological imbalances are seen as the most threatening of such problems.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Storingsmelding* Nr. 11 (1989-90), "Norge og verden" [Norway and the World].



The most significant aspect of this "new thinking" in Norwegian foreign policy is probably the *ambition* it signals, the idea that Norway - a rich state because of its offshore oil resources, but still small and weak - can make a real difference in international politics, a difference which is relevant to Norway's own security problems. Without that ambition, and without diplomatic results to prove its relevance, "extended security" as a foreign policy doctrine could soon be portrayed by the opposition as nothing but empty and worthless propaganda.

The Oslo Agreement is the triumph of the policy of extended security. The Norwegian Middle East secret diplomacy was set up by some of the most senior foreign policy decision-makers who had also formulated the operational codes of the present foreign policy. They include Thorvald Stoltenberg (foreign minister until April 1993 when he was appointed UN mediator in former Yugoslavia), his successor Johan Jørgen Holst (an experienced foreign policy analyst and a former defence minister), and Jan Egeland, state secretary of the ministry of foreign affairs since 1990 and today the most outspoken supporter of a policy based on the concept of extended security.

Characteristic of the approach of this group is a book published by Egeland entitled *Impotent Superpower - Potent Small State*.<sup>1</sup> In the book, which is based on his M.Phil. thesis of political science, he argues that a country like Norway is in many instances better situated than a country like the US to have an influence on human rights' policies in other parts of the world. Norway has certain comparative advantages as an honest broker, being a small state without an imperialist past and itself having been subject to foreign rule and occupation several times.

### **The Arab-Israeli conflict in Norwegian foreign policy: a brief review**

As do the public in most other Western countries, Norwegians (including foreign policy decision-makers) tend to relate the concept of a "Middle East policy" to a certain political orientation towards the Arab-Israeli dispute. We can hardly identify a specific Norwegian policy towards the rest of the region. Norway's relations with the Gulf states, for instance, are mostly handled by the ministry of trade or the ministry of oil and energy. As a specific foreign policy issue in the Norwegian foreign policy process, "the Middle East" (i.e., the Palestine/Arab-Israeli conflict) was, until 1995, administratively taken care of by the UN office in the foreign ministry, an arrangement introduced in 1947 with the UN discussion on the partition of Palestine. Traditionally, the ministry's UN office co-ordinates Norway's most high-ranking diplomacy, since the UN used to be, and probably still is, the country's most important diplomatic arena.

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<sup>1</sup> Egeland, Jan (1988), *Impotent Superpower - Potent Small State*, Oslo: Scandinavian University Press.



Norwegian "Middle East" policy was in a sense alienated from the realities of the region itself by the Cold War dimension which clearly dominated the foreign policy agenda in Norway. This was indeed part of a broader pattern at the time; regional conflicts tended to be subordinated under the East-West dichotomy as they became arenas of superpower rivalry. Voting in the UN on Middle East resolutions became more and more a question of alliance loyalty. In Norway's case it was a question of loyalty to NATO, i.e. basically to the US. Already in May 1948, at the time of the establishment of the state of Israel, Norway's UN ambassador Finn Moe reported to the ministry that the Palestine question had indeed "become part of the now well-known conflict between East and West."<sup>1</sup>

However, Norway's Middle East policy was not automatically reduced to its Cold War dimension. A detailed study of foreign ministry documents from the period 1945-50 reveals uncertainty and intense conflict within the Norwegian foreign policy elite on the question of Palestine.<sup>2</sup> The pattern seems to have been that the political leadership of the Labour government and the Norwegian UN delegation moved steadily towards pro-Zionism, while the staff of the UN office at the foreign ministry remained much more critical of Zionism and Israel, particularly in the late 1940s. The foreign ministry officials suggested that Norway should vote against the 1947 Palestine Partition Plan and against admitting Israel as a member of the UN and Norwegian recognition of Israel in 1949. They were overruled by the political leadership in both instances. The pro-Zionists in the Labour government had a strong supporter in UN Secretary-General Trygve Lie (himself a leading Labour politician) who regarded the creation of the state of Israel as his "personal baby".<sup>3</sup>

By 1950 Norway was solidly positioned in the pro-Israeli camp in international politics, and remained unquestionably so at least until 1974 when Norway voted in favour of allowing Yasser Arafat to address the UN General Assembly (but voted against granting the PLO Observer Status in the same organisation after an intensive pro-Zionist mobilisation, also in the Labour Party, against the first decision). In the early 1950s Norway's main interests in the Middle East were connected to the Suez Canal. Norway was the second largest Suez Canal user after Britain and felt offended by Egyptian restrictions on the canal traffic imposed during the Palestine War in 1948-9. The Norwegian shipowners - whose interests were strongly represented in the foreign ministry - and individual policymakers wanted Norway to support the activist British line of forcing Egypt to lift restrictions, and if necessary to involve Norway in a

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Waage, H.H. (1989), *Da staten Israel ble til. Et stridsspørsmål i norsk politikk 1945-50* [When the State of Israel was Created. A Disputed Issue in Norwegian Politics 1945-50], Oslo: Gyldendal, p. 149.

<sup>2</sup> See previous note.

<sup>3</sup> Waage (op.cit., p. 142) refers one documented case where the Secretary-General actively interfered in internal Norwegian discussions on the Palestine issue and tried (in vain) to persuade the Norwegian delegation to vote in a different way than decided.

military campaign. However, the government reluctantly followed the more moderate American policy, including during the crisis of the Suez War in 1956.

The official Norwegian pro-Zionism in this period had a very strong popular basis, particularly in the Labour movement, which at the time commanded a hegemonic position in national politics. This is what has been called "the era of the one-party state" in Norwegian political history and lasted until the mid-1960s. The Labour Party controlled the government, a disciplined majority in the parliament, the labour unions, the one and only radio channel, and an amazing number of newspapers all over the country.

This large and very centralised political movement was under the control of a few persons, notably the hot-tempered secretary-general of the Labour Party, Haakon Lie (no relation of Trygve Lie). His regime has often been described as "stalinistic", and in a sense it was: he used his *apparat* (and that of the secret police) to crush all left-wing opposition, including the Norwegian Communist Party (which was very strong after World War II) and to practise ideological and organisational "cleansing" in the labour unions.

As vigorous and committed as Haakon Lie's anti-Communism was his pro-Zionism, his other crusade in Norwegian politics. And he mobilised every part of the labour movement - the party, the unions, the MPs, the intellectuals, the editors - everyone in support of Israel in the 1950s and 1960s.

### **The Labour Party: Zionist connections**

Together with other leading cadres of the labour movement, Lie had built close relations with leaders of the Zionist labour movement during the war and after. There seem to have been strong political and cultural affinities between the two movements. They had both been victims of Nazism (in fact many Norwegian labour leaders had been prisoners in German concentration camps during the war) and were both committed to the idea of building a new and just society with the state as the central focus of loyalty and solidarity.

As a direct result of these contacts, contingents from the unofficial Zionist army, Haganah, were given military training by Norwegian officers in Norway in 1948, before the establishment of Israel.<sup>1</sup> In two books on the history of Norway's involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, both published in October 1996, it is further disclosed that Lie, in his capacity as secretary-general of the Labour Party, on several occasions assisted the Israelis on request in delicate operations, even when such assistance was against Norwegian law.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This was revealed by pro-Zionist sources in 1983, among them one of the instructors. It is, however, not known exactly how the training was arranged, who was responsible, the degree of government compliance, or the military significance of the training (Waage, *op.cit.*, p. 145).

<sup>2</sup> Odd Karsten Tveit, O.K. (1996): *Alt for Israel [In Full Support for Israel]*, Oslo: Cappelen; Waage, H.H. (1996): *Norge - Israels beste venn. Norsk Midtøsten-politikk 1949-1956 [Norway - Israel's Best Friend. Norwegian Middle East Policy 1949-56]*, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

The most consequential of such assistance was the provision of Norwegian heavy water which was used in the production of nuclear weapons at the Dimona plant. In this instance, Lie played a small, but probably crucial, part in the initial stage of the delivery project. Israel could not obtain heavy water from other sources at the time on acceptable conditions. The Norwegians did not make the sale conditional on a right on their part to inspect the usage of the water. Lie has recently confirmed his involvement in secret Israeli missions in interviews in books and TV, and has underlined that he "never asked questions" when the Israelis wanted his assistance.<sup>1</sup>

Labour pro-Zionism in Norway reached its peak around the time of the June War in 1967 when, again, Lie mobilised his movement for public support of Israel. But the movement had lost its political hegemony and already, in the wake of the June War, left-wing groups started to protest against the hysterical pro-Zionism in the labour movement under the influence of Haakon Lie.

From that time until the present, religious and right-wing parties and groups have taken the lead in pro-Zionist propaganda in Norway, while the labour movement has gradually slid away from its pro-Zionist past and is now largely pro-Palestinian. The younger generation in the party is definitely pro-Palestinian.

As indicated earlier, the first sign of an official change in attitude came in 1974 with Norway's vote in the UN in favour of Arafat addressing the UN General Assembly. The signal was that Norway would no longer support Israel almost uncritically and at all junctures, and that there was a need for a dialogue with the Palestinians and the PLO. The foreign minister at the time, Knut Frydenlund, came close to losing his job because of this vote. A senior Norwegian diplomat sees this vote, and Frydenlund's struggle to survive it, as the real starting-point of a Norwegian readiness to play an independent role in the Middle East peace diplomacy. It seems that Frydenlund had been convinced that the Middle East conflict was not only a conflict between Israel and the Arab states, both protected by respective superpowers, but more fundamentally a conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, and that this dimension had to be addressed and reconsidered sooner or later.

### **Norway and the PLO: building confidence**

At the very least, two conditions had to be fulfilled if Norway was to have a chance to play a role in Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution. First, both sides would have to have confidence in Norway's position as a reliable and trustworthy partner. A bridge must have solid foundations on both sides, particularly if the rift between them is deep and wide. The challenge here, of course, in the mid-1970s and onwards, was to build the foundations of an open and friendly

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<sup>1</sup> It is not known if Lie assisted Mossad in any military operation.



relationship with the PLO without at the same time alienating the extraordinary solid friendship with Israel. Secondly, the Norwegian government would have to accept the potential political and economic costs involved in such a task.

I am not implying that the Norwegian government made plans in the 1970s for the role it came to play in the peace process of the 1990s. I do not think policies are designed and implemented in that way. But I do think that there was a growing understanding in Norway and many other Western countries for the need to approach the Arab-Israeli conflict from new angles. Whether this was because of the October War in 1973, the Arab oil embargo, Israeli intransigence, Palestinian guerrilla raids and hijackings, the Arab states' recognition of the PLO as the sole, legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, or other developments, is subject to speculation. But during the late 1970s and early 1980s new avenues were opened up for contacts between the Palestinian resistance and Western governments and non-governmental organisations. In Norway, only a Labour government could succeed in such an endeavour. The non-socialist parties did not have the kind of contacts with Israeli leaders that the Labour Party had and would have nothing to do with the "terrorists" in the PLO. On the other hand, in the mid-1970s left-wing organisations, including some affiliated with the Labour Party, were eagerly establishing solidarity movements in support of the Palestinians and the PLO.

At least three of these avenues were important and contributed to the establishment of a confident relationship between the PLO, the Norwegian foreign policy élite and Labour Party leaders. The first was Norway's participation in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), organised after the first Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1978. The PLO had established a strong position in South Lebanon, both in terms of institutions and armed presence, and Norwegian diplomats and officers negotiated security arrangements with PLO leaders, and had experience of the difficult game of balancing diplomatically between Israel and the PLO. It is no secret that most Norwegians, when confronted with the situation in South Lebanon, tended to sympathise with the Palestinian cause and that many solid personal and professional Palestinian-Norwegian relations were established.<sup>1</sup> Johan Jørgen Holst, a pro-Zionist in the Labour Party establishment, was defence minister at the time. He became very much involved in the peacekeeping diplomacy in Lebanon and developed a more balanced view of the Palestinian movement. He met with Yasser Arafat for the first time in 1979.

A second avenue for confidence-building between Norway and the PLO was the one established by Norwegian solidarity organisations. There were two competing nationwide organisations of about the same size and with altogether hundreds of committed members. One of these, the Palestine Committee, was

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<sup>1</sup> By 1996 about 40,000 Norwegian soldiers, approximately 1 per cent of Norway's population, had served as military personnel in UNIFIL.

affiliated to the Worker's Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist), a sectarian party with less than 1 per cent support in the electorate. The other, the Palestine Front, later known as The Palestine Groups in Norway, was politically independent, but clearly dominated by left-wing groups. The Palestine Front organised a network of Norwegian political and professional organisations, trade unions etc., and worked hard to establish contacts between Palestinian organisations and leaders on the one hand and their Norwegian counterparts on the other. This work was most successful at the labour union level. In the course of a few years some of the most influential labour unions in Norway changed their attitude from pro-Israeli to pro-PLO. This, in turn, certainly had effects on the Labour Party. Furthermore, the Labour Party's youth organisation had already for some time sympathised with the Palestinian cause<sup>1</sup> and from the early 1980s joined an umbrella organisation for pro-Palestinian organisations initiated by the Palestine Front. A clear indication that the solidarity movement for the Palestinians had won the argument among the Left was the way in which the morally concerned public opinion reacted to the decision of the Norwegian Nobel Committee in 1978 to award the Nobel Peace Prize to Israel's prime minister, Menachem Begin (and Egypt's president, Anwar Sadat), after the signing of the Camp David Agreements. During the Peace Prize ceremony, some 7,000 demonstrators took to the streets of Oslo to protest against Begin being made a hero of peace (President Sadat did not show up in person to receive his part of the prize). This was the largest political demonstration in Norway since the end of the Vietnam war (when the said Committee awarded its prize to US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger!).

A third avenue was the Socialist International, the organisation of social democratic parties, mostly European. The Nordic parties were very active members of the Socialist International, which also included the Israeli Labour Party as a member. Political personalities like Bruno Kreisky of Austria, Willy Brandt of West Germany, and Olof Palme of Sweden were leaders of the movement. The Socialist International therefore became an important target for Palestinian diplomacy in its attempts to win political and diplomatic support in Europe. When a leader like Bruno Kreisky, himself a Jew of the World War II generation, met officially with Yasser Arafat, it contributed immensely to legitimising the PLO in the eyes of West Europe's social democrats. From the early 1980s doors to the political leaders in Europe, including Norway's prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, began to open up for the Palestinian leadership.

The war in Lebanon in 1982-3 with the Israeli bombings of Beirut and the massacre in the Sabra and Chatila camps made it even more difficult for Israel's social democratic friends in Europe. But the war, which resulted in the expulsion of the PLO headquarters and semi-state infrastructure from Lebanon, also made it much more difficult for solidarity groups and other organisations

<sup>1</sup> Already in 1971, under the leadership of Norway's current foreign minister Bjørn Tore Godal, the youth federation passed an avantgardistic resolution calling for a democratic state in all Palestine with equal rights for Jews, Muslims, and Christians, a position normally affiliated with the left-wing opposition in the Palestinian movement.

to cultivate and further develop their contacts with PLO institutions, now relocated to Tunis. In consequence, many organisations, among them Norwegian solidarity groups, moved the focus of their activity (medical clinics etc.) from Lebanon to the occupied territories (retaining substantial economic support from the Norwegian government in the process).

The last chapter in the building of a confident relationship between the PLO and the Norwegian Labour government started with the *Intifada* in the occupied territories from December 1987. At this juncture, pro-Palestinianism was no longer confined to the political Left in Norwegian politics. One remarkable example of this development was the change in attitude of Kaare Willoch, the leader of the Conservative Party and prime minister of a clearly pro-Israeli government in the mid-1980s. During the *Intifada* (i.e., after he had retired from government) he emerged as one of the most outspoken critics of Israel in the public debate. Moderate criticism of Israel became normalised in Norwegian political discourse and no longer implied politically damaging attacks from the pro-Israeli side. Shortly after the Labour Party returned to government (in November 1989), Thorvald Stoltenberg, foreign minister, paid an official visit to the PLO in Tunis. The visit was politically possible following the Palestine National Congress decisions in 1988 which laid the political foundations for Palestinian participation in a diplomatic peace process based on UN Security Council Resolution 242. The Israeli response to these decisions was indifferent or cold; the West's response was lukewarm. But social democrats in Scandinavia believed that a new opportunity for peace had been opened up.

The Swedish foreign minister, Sten Anderson, worked hard to facilitate contacts between the PLO and the US. When the Swedish Social Democratic Party lost the general election in 1991, he advised Yasser Arafat that Norway could serve as a channel to the Israelis. The PLO was at the time severely weakened politically and economically because of its anti-US stand during the Gulf War and needed a new strategy of survival. According to State Secretary Jan Egeland, he and Foreign Minister Stoltenberg received several PLO delegations in 1991 and early 1992 (which included Faisal Husseini and Hanan Ashrawi from the occupied territories and Nabil Shaat, Abu Sharif and Abu Ala from the PLO in Tunis).<sup>1</sup> They asked the Norwegians to facilitate direct contact with the Israelis.

At the same time, a junior Norwegian diplomat, Mona Juul, was stationed in Cairo. Her husband Terje Rød-Larsen went with her on leave from his position as Director of the Norwegian Trade Union Research Centre (FAFO) in Oslo. He used his stay in Cairo to design an ambitious research project on living conditions in the occupied territories; according to Jane Corbin this was first suggested to him by Fathi Arafat, president of the Palestinian Red

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<sup>1</sup> Egeland, Jan (1995): "The Norwegian Channel: the Secret Peace Talks Between Israel and the PLO", p. 5. Speech to the ARCO-Forum, Harvard University, 23 March 1995.



Crescent and brother of Yasser Arafat, and obtained the necessary approval from both the PLO and the Israeli authorities.<sup>1</sup>

In May 1992 Rød-Larsen met the Israeli Labour politician Yossi Beilin, another ambitious young man. Their ideas about the historical opportunities for peace in the region and the necessity for a secret channel to create a breakthrough were very similar. Within a few weeks, the Israeli Labour Party had won the elections in Israel and Beilin had been appointed deputy foreign minister. Rød-Larsen renewed his contact with Beilin and involved the foreign ministry in Norway. In September 1992 Egeland offered his counterpart Beilin Norwegian assistance in establishing a secret channel parallel to the official Madrid talks. The FAFO research project would provide a perfect camouflage for the channel. If leaked to the press, the meetings would be explained as academic seminars and official involvement could be denied. Very few people would be fully informed about the hidden agenda of the research project. The research co-ordinator based in Norway was Dr Marianne Heiberg, the wife of Johan Jørgen Holst who was still defence minister at this stage of the process. Dr Heiberg's sister was married to Foreign Minister Stoltenberg, making Holst and Stoltenberg brothers-in-law. "The Oslo Team" was a small and tightly-knit group of personal and political friends, partly family-related, with commanding influence over Norwegian foreign policy at the time. For the extremely difficult task of facilitating agreement between Israel and the PLO the group was excellently equipped with expertise, commitment, creativity, and experience in high-level diplomacy. The rest is history.

### Concluding remarks

Norway's decisive role in bringing about the Israel-PLO accord gave the otherwise low-profile Norwegian foreign policy a distinct identity in the international community. The 1993 Oslo Agreement between Israel and the PLO is often referred to as "historic", "a turning-point in the contemporary history of the Middle East" etc. If such characteristics are justified, it is not so much because of the *text* of the agreement (the Declaration of Principles, DOP) as because of the *diplomacy* that produced it. The Declaration itself does not address the historically intractable questions related to the Palestine problem.

The main elements of the DOP were already on the table in the open talks in the Middle East Peace Conference in Washington and well-known to the world at large. The significance of the Oslo Agreement is more related to the "confidence-building" diplomacy which started in 1992 as one of several informal "back-channels" to the official peace conference.

The lack of progress in the Washington talks was not primarily due to the failure of the parties to identify, or even agree to, a broad framework for a

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<sup>1</sup> Corbin, J. (1994): *Gaza First - the Secret Norway Channel to Peace between Israel and the PLO*, London: Bloomsbury.



peace process: a strategy for the peace process (two stages: one interim stage with Palestinian self-government and one final status negotiation stage); the main institutional mechanisms of the interim stage; and a timetable. The basic problem for the leaders on both sides, with the world media looking over their shoulders, was to know how the adversary in earnest understood and interpreted the various elements and how committed the other side would be to implementing the agreement.

In short, the "easiest" part of the peace process, relatively speaking, was to define the main elements which should go into a practical peace process - as long as the "final status questions" were kept out of the framework (the constitutional status of the Palestinian entity and the problems of Jerusalem, Jewish settlements in the occupied territories, and the Palestinian refugees). The hard part was to establish mutual confidence between leaders like Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin who were symbols of militant steadfastness of their respective peoples and who would have to take the political responsibility for an agreement with the arch-enemy. And as long as Arafat and the PLO were not even invited to the negotiations, the chances of a major breakthrough were small.

The secret talks in the Oslo region in 1992-3 did produce sufficient confidence, symbolised by the mutual exchange of letters on 9 September 1993 between Arafat and Rabin (facilitated by Foreign Minister Holst) whereby the PLO and Israel explicitly recognised each other (the mutual recognition is not part of the DOP, as some commentators seem to believe) and by the famous handshake between the two leaders in front of the White House during the signing ceremony on 13 September.

If I were to characterise very roughly what I believe are the motives behind what has been called the Norwegian "crusader diplomacy" in the Middle East - and other places around the globe<sup>1</sup> - I would say that I think it exemplifies how one can make a virtue of necessity. Norway has a very open economy; its security and welfare are dependent on the outside world. Having vast quantities of oil offshore does not change that reality. On the contrary, Norway is extremely dependent on the international oil market. Norway has few capabilities available to threaten or impose its will on the outside world, surrounded as it is by much stronger states - Russia, Sweden, Britain, Germany. Even tiny Denmark was able to rule Norway for 400 years. So how can Norway survive in a potentially unfriendly world? Who bothers about Norway? It needs security guarantees and trade relations. And for that purpose it helps if one can create some positive attention, an image of having a mission in the world, of having something special to offer in terms of political morality and conflict mediation. Norway already has the Nobel Peace Prize institution. Oslo, the

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<sup>1</sup> Norwegian representatives have been involved in efforts to find political solutions to conflicts in countries like Guatemala, Namibia, South Africa, Sudan, Sri Lanka, former Yugoslavia and possibly other places not yet publicly known. A peace agreement to end the civil war in Guatemala was scheduled to be signed in Oslo by the end of 1996.

Capital of Peace! Not at all a bad image.<sup>1</sup> I think Norway has probably found a niche in the international political market for its crusader diplomacy.

The present post-Cold War situation of international disorder is conducive to a further cultivation of this niche. This is an important motive in contemporary Norwegian foreign policy, a motive rationalised in the official foreign policy doctrine of "extended security".



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<sup>1</sup> Plans for a peace museum in Oslo are currently being discussed in Norway.